

Article

# “Beautiful and New”: The Logic of Complementarity in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*

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**Abstract:** This article suggests that reading John Cameron Mitchell’s musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* as a religious classic undermines the logic of complementarity within Catholic theological anthropology, particularly the Theology of the Body of John Paul II. A religious classic, a term coined by theologian David Tracy, describes a work with an “excess of meaning” that offers hope and resistance against a normative social structure. *Hedwig* resists the hegemonic structure of sexual dimorphism, as represented by the logic of complementarity operative within the Theology of the Body. This theological anthropology proposes a normative framework for human beings as gendered and sexual agents who “complete” each other through heterosexual and monogamous marital acts, reinforcing heterosexist and transphobic bodily norms. The work of Judith Butler helps illuminate the embodied performance of gender that the musical so brilliantly subverts. *Hedwig*, while toying with gender norms, also undermines the idea of the logic of complementarity—namely, that each person has another “half” that will cause completion, bringing human flourishing. In the title character not finding a version of “completeness” by the end of the show, the musical, thus, offers hope for those who cannot fit into gendered bodily norms.

**Keywords:** musical; gender; queer; Butler; Tracy; embodiment; theology; anthropology; John Paul II

## 1. Introduction

With musical hits like *The Color Purple*, *Fun Home*, *Head Over Heels*, *Pricilla*, *Queen of the Desert*, *Rocky Horror Show*, *Kinky Boots*, *Falsettos*, and *La Cage aux Folles*, Broadway musical theater as a genre of artistic expression never feared contending with the complexities of LGBTQ+ issues. While several gay and lesbian characters are proudly represented, there are very few lead roles that tell the life and times of trans\* individuals.<sup>1</sup> One notable exception is the 1998 Off-Broadway musical, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. Written and originally performed by John Cameron Mitchell, the show tells the story of Hedwig, a German-born rock singer who strives to find love and acceptance both as an artist and singer. The “Angry Inch” part of the title comes from Hedwig’s botched sex change surgery that results in her body as being sexed as neither male nor female but caught in a liminal space.<sup>2</sup> With this graphic and

<sup>1</sup> The asterisk is added to trans in order to illustrate how the term can encapsulate the new ways of being in the world. As described by Jack Halberstam, the marker points to “a politics based on a general instability of identity and oriented toward social transformation, not political accommodation.” He continues, “the category takes the prefix for transitivity and couples it with the asterisk that indicates a wildcard in internet searches; it is a diacritical mark that poses a question to its prefix and stands in for what exceeds the politics of naming and recognition.” This gestures toward the failure of current and future classificatory systems that humans can come up. For him, the idea is “not to impose ever more precise calibrations of bodily identity but rather to think in new and different ways about what it means to claim a body.” In other words, the purpose of the category of trans\*, in it being fragmented, segmented, and multiple, is to point to it being “a capacious and fluid category rather than a diagnosis” (Halberstam 2018, p. 88).

<sup>2</sup> While Hedwig’s character may be described as intersex or gender queer, the character is generally referred to using feminine pronouns. Since the character does not describe herself as transgender and the show refers to the surgical procedure as a “sex change,” I opt to describe the incident thusly rather than as a gender confirmation surgery.

unusual premise for a show, the character is rife for using the tropes of musical theater and glam-rock for meditating on non-normative experiences of gender and embodiment.

One of the main themes of the show concerns “the logic of complementarity.” This logic describes how every person has a supposed “partner” that functions to “complete” that person. By this logic, a person remains incomplete and unfulfilled until finding one’s “better half.” In operating under this logic, finding a significant other is one of the most important goals for achieving happiness and flourishing. While the logic of complementarity disseminated into popular culture—think of the ubiquity of the term “soul mate”—such logic is also present within religion as well. As represented by the interpretation of Genesis of Pope John Paul II in the collection of texts called “Theology of the Body,” the logic of complementarity is crucial for setting the grounds for a normative anthropology, here referring to an understanding of what it means to be human in relation to God.

The musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, while not explicitly grappling with Theology of the Body, contends explicitly with the logic of complementarity. As articulated by the myth of Aristophanes from Plato’s *Symposium*, Hedwig aspires to find her “other half” in a world that perpetual rejects her as a legitimate artist and viable romantic partner. The show engages specifically with the logic of complementarity within Christianity through the character Tommy Gnosis through a lens not unlike the interpretation of Genesis proposed by John Paul II. Indeed, the show might be read as a “religious classic,” one that offers hope and resistance over against pervading gender norms. I argue for an interpretation of the show as its own theological anthropology that posits hope for those who do not or cannot long for a significant other that “completes” them in these mythologized accounts of being human.

While Mitchell makes no direct reference to Roman Catholic Theology of the Body in the text of the musical itself, he was, however, raised as a Roman Catholic during the pontificate of John Paul II. He eventually came to reject his Catholicism by becoming both a Radical Faerie and a Universal Life Minister ([Universal Life Church 2019](#)). As this reading later shows, both the character and the author reject normative understandings of the human person based on the logic of complementarity and offer a radically new anthropology.

Firstly, this article explains what is meant by a religious classic, here referring to a text, event, person, or work of art that gives excess to meaning as an act of resistance against normative structures. In this case, the normative structure refers to the “logic of complementarity,” as exemplified by the Theology of John Paul II. Then, the work of Judith Butler is marshaled to help illuminate the complex dynamics of gender and embodiment operative within the show. Finally, the text of the show is analyzed at length in order to propose an alternative theological anthropology to the logic of complementarity.

## 2. Hedwig and the Angry Inch—A Religious Classic?

As a contemporary theologian deeply engaged with philosophical hermeneutics, David Tracy is famous for his theories of religious interpretation, especially with his term, “religious classic.” A classic has “an excess of meaning” that “demands constant interpretation and bears a certain kind of timelessness” ([Tracy 1981](#), p. 102). This is an instance whereby the interpreter is called to be “vexed, provoked, challenged by the claim to attention of the text itself” ([Tracy 1981](#), p. 105). A classic transforms “if only for a moment, ourselves: our lives, our sense for possibilities and actuality, our destiny” ([Tracy 1981](#), p. 110). The classic is created when an artist dives into reality to tell us something new and true about existence. The artist or author enters a moment of intensification that takes one into new territories. This diving into new existence allows us as interpreters of it to see something new, “its fatedness, its challenge, its finitude, its horrors, its possibility, its joy.” Through this process, people who encounter the work are led to believe that such intensification is worth its risk. It allows those who encounter the work to realize that we now grasp essential truths that were not realized outside of this diving into reality ([Tracy 1981](#), p. 126).

The religious classic is characterized by this “diving into reality” in relation to human encounters with God. For Tracy asserts, the task of the theologian is to interpret encounters with God as religious classics as acts of hope and resistance. In interpreting religious classics, we allow them “to challenge what we presently consider possible. To interpret them is also to allow ourselves to challenge them through every hermeneutic of critique, retrieval, and suspicion we possess.” His work with a variety of thinkers led him to explore the possibility of interpreting God in fairly unconventional sites. Within the constellation of thinkers labeled as “post-modern” Tracy notes how “the language of love as in the love of the mystics, along with their use of erotic and sometimes violent, transgressive language” was used for constructive and political ends alike (Tracy 1994, pp. 314–15). Another aspect of this constellation of dispositions is a prophetic impulse seeking to overthrow the oppression and hegemony of modernity. For Tracy, an experience of God is manifested within the groups designated as “non-persons,” folks thrust to the margins of society. The voice of God is mediated through “hysterics, fools, avant-garde artists, and dissenters of all kinds” (Tracy 1994, pp. 317–18). Discerning different ways of talking about God means interpreting new and unusual sources that have the potential to give way to an “excess of meaning.” For Tracy, religious beliefs become acts of hope that are also “acts of resistance against the status quo” (Tracy 1987, pp. 84–85). They are an awareness of God as the Ultimate Reality and an innate concern for those often made the societal Other (Tracy 1987, p. 104). The person who interprets a religious classic will discern “the interruptive presence of Ultimate Reality empowering a way of life otherwise thought impossible” (Tracy 1987, p. 108). Tracy’s notion of the religious classic emphasizes new ways of understanding God as concerned for marginalized communities, thus offering hope and resistance to help imagine new ways of being in the world.

One aspect of Tracy’s articulation of the term “religious classic” is the ambiguity for its qualifications. As a Roman Catholic theologian, he posits the Christ event, the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, as the “religious classic” par excellence. This leads him to claim that all theology is a “hermeneutical endeavor” since all Christian thought traces its origins to an interpretation of the Christ event (Tracy 1981, p. 64). His references to works of art that do contain an “excess of meaning” seem to be what one would expect for a gender-conforming, white priest who spent decades in academia: the Sistine Chapel, the music of Bach, and the poetry of T. S. Eliot.<sup>3</sup> The choice of these works into this “religious classic” canon suggests more about the tastes and background of Tracy than the works themselves. As with every consumer of art and media, his choice of works to examine is limited by his particular horizon of experience. This same limitation, of course, leaves space for other interpreters inhabiting alternative horizons to examine different texts in a similar manner.

*Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is a fairly recent addition to the American musical theater canon, making its Off-Broadway debut in 1998. Within that short timeframe, *Hedwig* became immensely popular within the past 20 years, with multiple productions throughout the world, a 2001 film with a cult following, national tours, and a hit Broadway revival in 2014.<sup>4</sup> For such a show to achieve rabid popularity, surely there must be some kind of “excess of meaning” to which people are extrapolating from the show? Furthermore, given the many philosophical and religious themes running throughout the text of the show, the show, if anything else, seems rife for theological engagement. *Hedwig* certainly qualifies as a religious classic insofar as it gives way to an excess of meaning, operates from a marginalized perspective, and tries to rail against a normative structure, in this case, sexual and gender dimorphism and the relational norms that help maintain its power.

<sup>3</sup> See his commentary on the recent “Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination” exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City for an example of his analysis of Roman Catholic art (Tracy 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, with the 2014 revival of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, the once subterranean and subversive show seems to have reached “mainstream” audiences. The show opened on 24 April 2014, with openly gay (and immensely popular) actor, Neil Patrick Harris, in the title role. The production ran for 507 regular performances, receiving multiple Tony wins in June of 2014, including best actor for Harris and best revival of a musical. The role of Hedwig was filled by many mainstream and celebrity actors, including Andrew Rannells, Michael C. Hall, John Cameron Mitchell, Darren Criss, and Taye Diggs. The Broadway revival ran for a total of 507 performances after 22 previews (Broadway.com 2015).

### 3. Theology of the Body and the Logic of Complementarity

If Hedwig is to be read as a religious classical, i.e., an interpreted work of art that acts as a tool of resistance, what exactly is the musical resisting? To bring the musical into the realm of the theology, one first needs to be familiar with theological anthropology and how it relates to the logic of complementarity as exemplified in the Theology of the Body of Pope John Paul II.

The work of John Paul II functions as what Christian theologians refer to as theological anthropology. Theological anthropology describes the critical reflection on the human person in relation to God. If systematic theology describes how things hang together in relation to God, theological anthropology is the subfield in which human beings, namely, human embodied experiences, get taken into consideration. Theological anthropology is crucial for the field of sexual ethics because ethical claims on what a human person “does” as a sexual agent are typically based on what a human person “is.” This subfield within theology is also a fraught topic, due to its collusion with pernicious ideologies. Positing one normative definition of the “human” often leads to a totalitarianism that marginalizes bodies that do not conform to that particular norm.<sup>5</sup> Theological anthropology often proves to be the source of violence from within Christianity, be it in a linguistic, metaphysical, or corporeal manifestation.

Within contemporary Roman Catholic theological sexual ethics, the pervading model for theological anthropology, Theology of the Body, creates a totalizing norm for the human person as a gendered and sexual agent, and this anthropology operates through the logic of complementarity. The logic of complementarity presupposes two potential embodied frameworks for human beings: biological males and biological females who must “complete” each other in a monogamous, marital union. Within this model, the body in which a person is born dictates how they are to inhabit the world. For the latter half of the 20th century, the greatest champion of the logic of complementarity was Pope John Paul II. This body of work, combined in a collection of papal addresses and documents often referred to as Theology of the Body, articulates the logic of complementarity through an interpretation of the creation story of Genesis. In basing his anthropology on a myth, explicitly interpreting the myth as articulating a fundamental anthropological reality, John Paul II normalizes a fixed view of gender based on sexual dimorphism.

Here, the word “myth” is not being used as in pejorative or dismissive manner. A myth, as described by Terrence Tilley, is a “*story that sets up a world.*” He adds that myths are powerful within religious texts insofar as to accept a myth is to “accept it as expressing a fundamental truth about the world.” Tilley helpfully notes that the creation myths of Genesis in particular may be read as “a human representation of the created world as fundamentally good” (Tilley 2010, pp. 76–78). Both Hedwig and John Paul II provide interpretations of myths as articulating fundamental truths about the human person.

For the sake of this article, one need only examine a brief excerpt of his writings to understand how this logic of complementarity permeates his work. In the set of lectures titled “Original Unity of Man and Woman,” the pope turns to the beginning of Genesis in order to ground his anthropology. The lectures are framed as an interpretation of the indissolubility of marriage expressed by Jesus in Matthew 19. In order to further explain the theological significance of this gospel passage, John Paul II returns to the same passage from Genesis referenced within the words ascribed to Jesus. For him, Jesus is operating from a normative understanding of sexual ethics based on a distinct anthropology. He focuses on the second account of creation, writing how it “forms a conceptual and stylistic unity with the description of original innocence, man’s happiness, and also his [sic] first fall” (John Paul II 1997, p. 27). According to the first account, the human person, in being created male and female, is to procreate. The second account, however, contains “the most ancient description and record of man’s

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<sup>5</sup> Theological anthropology allowed theological discourse to become the culprit of many pernicious social evils. Examples of the problems it causes abound. For examples on the topic of race, see Copeland (2010) and Jennings (2010). For an example of gender, see Gonzalez (2007).

self-knowledge" (John Paul II 1997, pp. 28–29). Within the narrative of the second account of creation, as the reader may know, the first woman was created from the rib of the first human. Subsequently, the human person was, at one point, divided and seeks to be united through the marital act and the procreation of children.

Within this account, John Paul II observes that the human person exists in solitude, yet longs for the company of others (John Paul II 1997, p. 35). For him, "Man is a subject not only because of his self-awareness and self-determination, but also on the basis of his own body. The structure of this body permits him to be the author of a truly human activity. In this activity the body expresses the person" (John Paul II 1997, pp. 40–41). This takes the form of "the signs of sex" and "is male or female by its nature." This leads into a version of "masculinity" and "femininity" that each person needs in order to be "complete." Notably, John Paul II refers to this narrative as a "myth" insofar as it is "an archaic way of expressing a deeper content" (John Paul II 1997, p. 43). Based on this, he writes, "the woman is for the man, and vice versa, the man is for the woman" (John Paul II 1997, p. 45).

Within this anthropology, human bodies can fall into one of two normative categories as sexed bodies that are assigned at birth. Each person is inherently viewed as "incomplete" from having been torn asunder from one's supposed "other half." Each person also remains "incomplete" until finding one's "other" half. From this anthropology, one gleams the two norms of traditional Roman Catholic sexual ethics: unity and procreation. Since human beings are taken apart from each other, their "completion" through heterosexual and monogamous marriage allows this unity to take place. In addition to being "unifying," sex must be procreative in being open to life. As a result of this understanding of the human person, any deviation from these two norms is in some way problematic. Topics like same-gender sex, polyamory, sexual promiscuity, contraception, and pre-marital sex are all regarded as sinful. As succinctly observed by Charles Curran, "The Theology of the Body as developed by John Paul II, however, cannot serve as a theology for all bodies" (Curran 2005, p. 168). Regarding gender, the logic of complementarity reifies gender norms into metaphysical concepts, marking versions of trans\* embodiment as deviants.<sup>6</sup> Individuals who are intersex are not even legible as theological considerations of embodiment.

The logic of complementarity is then proven to cause multiple theological consequences due to one normative framework for embodiment. For queer Roman Catholics today, such a formulation of the human body leads to marginalization and feelings of worthlessness. Salzman and Lawler achieved both acclaim and criticism for attempting to reformulate Theology of Body as a "relational complementarity." While not unlike what is seen with Hedwig's employment of the myth of Aristophanes in Plato's Symposium, the authors expand the framework offered by John Paul II to include same-gender couples. Problems still emerge when one's form of embodiment does not fit into a normative gender role. The authors posit "a holistic complementarity, which includes sexual orientation complementarity as one of its types, embraces the totality and complexity of the human person, and reconstructs genital complementarity to be in dialogue with, and at the service of, personal and orientation complementarity." For them, "the genitals may be said to be complementary when they are used in a moral sexual act that realizes the psychoaffective, social, and spiritual elements of ontological complementarity" (Salzman and Lawler 2008, p. 91). While this model is more inclusive, the framework still presupposes an inherent "lack" that can be completed within a relationship. A person, as a relational entity, still demands to be complimented somehow.

#### 4. Hedwig and Gender

Since the logic of complementarity relies so much on philosophical and theological formulations of gender, some of the work of Judith Butler provides a helpful tool to understand how the title character

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<sup>6</sup> The recent document administered by the Congregation for Catholic education only further doubles down on this version of gender essentialism. See (Congregation for Catholic Education 2019).

subverts such binaries. In a performed musical that ruminates so extensively on notions of gender and identity, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* seems perfect for exploring some of Butler's ideas on the performative facets of gender. Firstly, an introduction to some of Butler's thought is due. Butler is most famous for popularizing the notion of the performativity of gender in her seminal work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. While the text initially sought to critique heterosexist versions of so-called "French Theory," which itself was responding to the overly patriarchal readings of Freud offered by Jacques Lacan, the notion of "gender as a performance" is what became most famous.<sup>7</sup> What is meant by this concept? Referring to gender as a performance indicates how it functions as a normative, yet socially constructed, script regarding the manner in which sexed bodies are expected to inhabit the world.

Gender, for Butler, refers to a "norm" that demarcates some human bodies as different from other human bodies. Norms illustrate how human bodies are always caught up in language in materializing within human forms of signification.<sup>8</sup> Norms operate as bodily social conventions and actions that dictate hegemonic ways of being human. As described by Leticia Sabsay, Butler's formulation of norms "structure and inform bodily practices that enact psychic processes of identification by which we come into being. They are pre-predicative, not explicit, and learned in embodied practical ways" (Sabsay 2016, p. 292). A norm as a regulatory tool "is always and only tenuously embodied by any particular social actor." Gender, as a norm, refers to that which "governs the social intelligibility of action," especially in relation to sexed bodies. Norms are conventions that determine which bodily practices are recognizable, "imposing a grid of intelligibility on the social and defining the parameters of what will and will not appear within the domain of the social" (Butler 2004, pp. 41–42). Norms not only describe one's conduct but also condition the possibility of recognition (Butler 2005, p. 25). They, thus, describe the conditions of the emergence of the self as a social entity (Butler 2005, p. 8).

One of Butler's most famous phenomena used to illustrate the "performative" aspect of gender is one immediately relevant to an analysis of *Hedwig*: drag. For her, drag illustrates a particular role in relation to the subversion of gender. Drag is that which "troubles" how one thinks of gender because it can "elucidate a structure that is at work in everyday performances of gender, and so to make this reiterative production of reality-effects legible as a repeated practice in so-called ordinary social life." As this becomes clear in *Hedwig*, drag illustrates the idea that "'reality' is given to certain kinds of gender appearances over others, and that those who are transgendered are regularly debased and pathologized for 'not being real.'" Drag can undermine the apparent "essentialism" present within assumptions about gender. "The point," she writes, "is that the ontological field is mobilized by power relations, and that what we come to regard and affirm as 'real' or 'unreal' can and does undergo critical change depending on social mobilizations of various kinds" (Butler 2006, p. 282). Within the context of the musical, Hedwig attempts to "perform" her role a woman. She aspires to "assume" a body, to use Gayle Salamon's phrase, regarding her gender identity (Salamon 2010). Yet the status of her genitals being described as the "one-inch mound of flesh" prevents her from achieving being regarded as a "real" woman. She, thus, remains, as shown, a queer outlier, one stuck in the performative contradiction of being neither a "man" nor a "woman" yet inhabiting an unusual liminal space.

In an article on the movie adaptation of the show, Matthew Henry employs some of the work of Butler, and his analysis of the film is relevant to some of the major themes of the show. With the "socially constructed" aspects of gender having influenced an entire generation of filmmakers, the film "offers a loud and radical challenge to received ideas about queer identity; in short, the film works to subvert binary categories, to contest hegemonic ideologies, and to destabilize essentialist notions of sex, gender, and sexuality." The film, while on the surface, appears to be tragic, but it is

<sup>7</sup> See Butler's response to the critiques of *Gender Trouble* in the 1999 Preface to the text (Butler 1990, pp. vi–xxviii). See also "Can the 'Other' of Philosophy Speak?" for an autobiographical account of her engagement with the reception of text (Butler 2004).

<sup>8</sup> This is the meaning of the title to Butler's 1993 follow-up to *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies that Matter*.

liberating and empowering in illustrating “the constructed nature of gender” through parody (Henry 2016, pp. 65–67). Notably, Hedwig, is not a transgender character, at least in the most commonly depicted narrative tropes associated with gender dysphoria. Starting at a small queer-friendly venue called the Squeezebox in New York City, Hedwig’s character came into existence as a live singer, one person with a clearly performative identity that would be torn off at the end of each performance. So, for Hedwig’s conception, there is no narrative of “longing to become her true self” or “being born into the wrong body.” Hedwig’s transition is done out of practical necessity for her to travel to the United States, yet it is an identity she embraces as she pursues her stage persona.

Henry observes the ways Mitchell uses “philosophical concepts” to get points across to the viewer. Mitchell intended the myth of Aristophanes to be essential for interpreting the character as a “walking metaphor” for the myth (Henry 2016, p. 69). Henry highlights how “completeness” as part of one’s romantic quest disseminated Western culture. This version of anthropology operates under the logic of complementarity and often re-inscribes versions of gender roles, even within lesbian and gay communities, often in terms of “butch/masculine” and “feminine” pairings of couples. This obviously fails to accommodate trans\* individuals who do not fall so easily within such demarcations. Henry observes that Mitchell “is intent on critiquing the romantic myth of love,” as articulated in the logic of complementarity, “and exposing it as a fallacy” (Henry 2016, p. 70). In an interview, Mitchell notes that the romanticizing of relationships based on the logic of complementarity has a negative effect. He observes, “it brings up all these ideas about monogamy, sexuality, and gender, and the myth is great, because it includes every possible kind of attachment. But you never will, no matter how hard you hold onto someone, become one person.” Henry observes how the film version seeks to undermine the famous line stating from *Jerry Maguire*: “You complete me.” For Henry, “The mythological search for another is rendered false, and the film becomes a tale of self-acceptance, self-identification, and self-actualization” (Henry 2016, p. 73). Henry also observes how as a media item, the film is intent on “interrogating, if not dismantling, the ‘sacred order’ of normative sex and gender categories, thereby challenging conventional notions of sexuality, desire, and love.” He adds that it can be “read in political terms as a liberatory text because it offers viewers a vision of unrestrained freedom: the knowledge of one’s self combined with the ability to freely choose and to (re)create one’s identity” (Henry 2016, p. 75). Henry, thus, validates the film version as a liberatory text to resist hegemonic formulations of gender in addition to undermining the logic of complementarity.

While Henry’s work is helpful for analyzing the film version of the show, he ignores the explicit religious themes running throughout. Furthermore, the embodied aspect of the thematic material takes on new meaning in a live performance. Rather than grappling with an image on a screen, the audience experiences a living, breathing body in front of them. Given that gender remains a distinctly embodied phenomenon, seeing a living body on stage playing with gender norms can often yield a stronger affective response. Seeing a person on stage will easily, for many, create a greater degree of empathy and attention from viewers if the performer is dancing and singing right before them. More significantly, formulations of theological anthropology are meant to relate to living human bodies in order to make a substantive claim on people’s lives. Theological formulations of the human, thus, take on greater weight if a living person present—even as a performance—can help to undermine them.

## 5. “You Complete Me”

Having described the logic of complementarity within religious language, formulations of the performativity of gender in the thought of Butler, and how her ideas relate to the film version, an analysis of the musical itself is now in order.<sup>9</sup> As described by Henry, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*

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<sup>9</sup> The version analyzed here is based on the 1998 Off-Broadway production. The script for the 2014 Broadway version is slightly different. Specifically, the premise for the production is altered in order for the character to have a reason to be performing in that venue. For this production, Hedwig takes over a theater in which a production of the fictional Broadway musical adaptation of the war film *The Hurt Locker* just closed. This set-up is meant to mock the pervasive occurrence

troubles the romantic aphorism, “you complete me.” Indeed, the narrative of the musical is based on Hedwig’s attempt to fulfill an anthropology based on the logic of complementarity, and, by the end of the show, she disavows this belief in finding peace in her own uniqueness. Her frustrated attempts to find “completion” through a romantic partner invites the viewer to consider the futility of the logic of complementarity and the norms that demarcate gender.

The show begins with an articulation of Hedwig’s status as a queer outlier. From the outset, her body’s existence is meant to destabilize gender binaries. Born as a boy in East Germany, Hedwig is seen as crossing over the wall of a country in the same way she attempts to cross over the “wall” of a perceived gender binary. The opening track, “Tear Me Down,” summarizes the transgressive aims of the character: “I was born on the other side/ of a town ripped in two/ I made it over the great divide/ Now I’m coming for you” (Mitchell 1998, p. 14). Her identity is presented in relation to its liminal subversion of normative binaries. Yitzhak, her current Jewish husband and fellow bandmate, shouts out,

The world was divided by a cold war  
and the Berlin wall  
was the most hated symbol of that divide . . .  
Ladies and Gentleman  
Hedwig is like that wall  
standing before you in the divide  
between East and West  
Slavery and Freedom,  
Man and Woman  
Top and Bottom (Mitchell 1998, p. 15)

Hedwig’s existence troubles hotly kept binaries, and this status made her hated. She finishes the song with, “There ain’t much of a difference/ between a bridge and a wall./ Without me in the middle, babe/ you would be nothing at all” (Mitchell 1998, pp. 15–16). In a unique aspect of self-awareness, Hedwig understands how the liminal status within a binary illustrates the limitations of that binary.

She then sets up the story to be about her relationship with her rock protégé, Tommy Gnosis, but to do that, Hedwig turns to describing her background and how ideas of “completion” motivated her from her youth. She mentions her mother and tells an anecdote about watching *Jesus Christ Superstar* with her. Hedwig, as a young boy, says “Jesus said the darndest things,” which leads to a slap in the face as a rebuke. The young Hedwig and her mother fall asleep. They lie in bed, and Hedwig describes them as “like two pieces of a puzzle that don’t quite fit but are jammed together and left on a table by . . . (railing at the heavens) . . . some dangerous shut-in with too much time on his hands,” as if illustrating how loneliness defined her life even from an early age (Mitchell 1998, pp. 22–23). She then sings “The Origin of Love” as a “bedtime story” her mom would tell her.

The “Origin of Love” is a retelling of the myth of the creation of humanity by Aristophanes from Plato’s *Symposium*. Mitchell felt this myth was so significant that he opted to publish a version of the myth at the end of the publication of the script for the musical. In the song, humanity originally consisted of three differently sexed bodily types: males with males (the children of the sun), females with females (children of the moon), and males with females (children of the moon). The gods realize

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within Broadway to adapt movies into musicals due to their being a recognizable commodity and, thus, less of a financial risk. Later in the show, Yitzhak sings “When Love Explodes,” a song from the aforementioned fake musical. These slight modifications to the show are more for comedic effect and illustrate the show’s acceptance into a more mainstream musical theater canon insofar as there needs to be an explicit justification within the world of the show for Hedwig’s presence in a Broadway theater.



that humanity grows too powerful and seek to make humanity weaker by separating them from each other. “Love” is brought to existence as the longing of a separated person for the respective “other half.” Human beings “make love” when they smash their bodies against each other in an attempt to find meaningful wholeness (Mitchell 1998, pp. 25–31).

While the narrative of the myth of the song differs from the Platonic text in that it includes non-Greek deities, with references to Osiris, Thor, and “some Indian god,” the logic of complementarity remains the same. Upon completing the song, the young Hedwig is deeply impacted by the song and wonders about finding the missing half:

“It is clear that I must find my other half. But is it a he or a she? Is it Daddy? He went away. Or Mother? ... What does this person look like? Identical to me? Or somehow complementary? Does my other half have what I don’t? Did he get the looks, the luck, the love? Were we really separated forcibly, or did he just run off with the good stuff? Or did I? Will this person embarrass? And what about sex? Is that how we put ourselves back together again? Is that what Daddy was trying to do? Or can two people actually become one again? And if we’re driving on the Autobahn when it happens, can we still use the diamond lane?”. (Mitchell 1998, pp. 31–32)

Hedwig adds that she is asking, “practical questions of wholeness. Completion.” She thought of the “power” that the gods themselves feared when he achieves completion with his missing half (Mitchell 1998, p. 32).

One first notes a number of parallels between the myth of Aristophanes the musical invokes and the use of the Genesis creation myth from *Theology of the Body*. Both posit a normative view of the human based around the logic of complementarity. Admittedly, the myth offered by Plato seems to be more inclusive insofar as it provides space for same-gender couples. In this sense, one could view this myth as an enrichment of the creation myth suggested in Genesis. Yet problems still emerge. Specifically, the myth still reifies the existence of only two embodied gender configurations. For folks such as Hedwig, a character who has neither an identifiable penis nor vagina, her body cannot fit into this paradigm. Furthermore, the myth still imposes a version of “fulfillment” that will emerge in finding one’s “other half.” This idea of “wholeness” and “completion” offered by the myth of Aristophanes—one that only leads to heartbreak and sadness—provokes much of the action of the character in the musical.

Continuing with the recollection of her youth, Hedwig mentions how she meets Luther, an American soldier living in East Germany. Luther quickly develops a romantic relationship with her and offers her candy in the process of his courtship. In the song, “Sugar Daddy,”<sup>10</sup> Hedwig relishes in the power she has over Luther in the relationship, “Oh the thrill of control/ like the rush of rock and roll/ is the sweetest taste I’ve known.” Luther, in a brief line of dialogue in the show, suggests Hedwig would look better in a dress, “And I was thinking you’d look so fine/ in a velvet dress/ with heels and an ermine stole.” Hedwig agrees, “So you think only a woman/ can truly love a man./ Then you buy me a dress/ I’ll be more woman/ than a man you can stand.” She invokes classic artistic representations of femininity, “I’ll be your Venus on a chocolate clam shell/ rising on a sea of marshmallow foam” (Mitchell 1998, pp. 39–41).

Hedwig agrees to marry Luther, and, in order to do so, she also agrees to have a vaginoplasty operation. The operation, of which Hedwig sings in “The Angry Inch,” is a failure. Rather than having a vagina or a penis, she has something peculiar caught between:

When I woke up from the operation

<sup>10</sup> The song arrangement for the original Off-Broadway version and the 2014 Broadway revival is notably different. In the Off-Broadway version, as in the movie, the number comes across more as a country song. In the Broadway revival, which was performed at the 2014 Tony Awards, the song is much more upbeat and fast-paced. The number was effectively turned into a more conventional “show-stopper” to make the production more similar to mainstream Broadway shows.

I was bleeding down there  
 I was bleeding from the gash between my legs  
 my first day as a woman  
 and already it's that time of the month  
 But two days later  
 the hole closed up.  
 The wound healed  
 and I was left with a one-inch mound of flesh  
 where my penis used to be  
 where my vagina never was (Mitchell 1998, p. 45)

According to the norm of one's genitals determining one's gender, Hedwig is neither a man nor a woman but caught in some liminal space. At this point, from a technical standpoint, Hedwig might be considered intersex but is never referred to as such. Like the wall that she sings about in the opening song, Hedwig is an outlier that somehow stands in the middle of a strict binary. Within the logic of sexual complementarity of Theology of the Body, along with the myth of Aristophanes, this character can no longer find another "half" who will complete her due to a failure to meet bodily norms.

Upon arriving to the United States (US), the Berlin Wall falls as Luther leaves Hedwig for another man. Having moved to Junction City, Kansas, Hedwig decides to create a new rock persona for herself and embark on a musical career as "punk rock star on stage and screen." She then performs "Wig in a Box," and, in the number, Hedwig puts on various wigs and adopts different personas, such as a "Miss Midwest Midnight Checkout Queen" or "Miss Beehive 1963."

At one point during the song, she sings, "I look back on where I'm from/ look at the woman I've become/ and the strangest things/ seem suddenly routine" (Mitchell 1998, p. 47). Here, many readers of Butler's work are tempted to apply a common misinterpretation of her work to the scene. Many interpret this philosopher, especially after only reading *Gender Trouble*, that gender is performative in the sense of donning a wig and a dress one day. In the beginning of *Bodies that Matter*, Butler criticizes this misreading of her work. She writes, "For if I were to argue that genders are performative, that could mean that I thought that one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night." Such a willful autonomy, an image of an individual who is somehow able to float above political and societal norms, is inconsistent with her thought as a whole. Gender, like other norms, "is constructed through relations of power and, specifically, normative constraints that not only produce but also regulate bodily beings" (Butler 1993, p. ix). For Butler, bodies, mediated through norms, go through a process of materialization "that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter" (Butler 1993, p. xviii). A Butlerian reading of this number does suggest, however, that Hedwig invokes the prescriptive norms associated with gender in donning the various wigs. Rather, it is the inevitable failure of Hedwig to fulfill the norms of being a "woman" that point to the non-essential characteristics of gender.

After finding her persona as a "punk rock star of stage and screen," she then tells the story of her meeting Tommy Gnosis. The boy, then going by Tommy Speck, is described as a "Jesus freak with a fish on his truck." She finds him to be "incredibly hot. Perhaps it was his disdain for authority, his struggle with organized religion" (Mitchell 1998, p. 57). Throughout the musical, Tommy represents a person who also believes in a version of the logic of complementarity, albeit in an explicitly Christian form. Like with the writings of John Paul II, Tommy cites his version of this story as part of an interpretation of the creation myth of Adam and Eve within Genesis. After performing the song, "Little Wicked Town," a lament about the struggles of being a misfit in a small town, Hedwig takes the young Tommy under her wing.

When they meet, Tommy asks her, “Have you accepted Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as your personal savior?” Hedwig replies, “I told him I was aware of Our Lord. Loved his work.” Tommy then notes how Jesus “saved us from His fucking father.” He expresses disdain at God’s punishing Adam and Eve when “Eve just wanted to know shit” (Mitchell 1998, p. 61). After her student completes the rock curriculum, Hedwig gives him the last name “Gnosis,” the Greek word for knowledge, to reference Eve’s desire for knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Within Tommy’s stage name, there lies a reference to the biblical myth of the origin of humanity.

After a few months of performing and success, Tommy and Hedwig find themselves collaborating more and more. One day, Hedwig is helping Tommy and looks into his eyes, noticing “new lenses, one blue and one pink,” suggesting the two colors often ascribed to the normative gender binary. They then have a conversation about “immortal love,” gesturing toward the “metaphysical” articulation of gendered complementarity operative in both John Paul II and Plato. Hedwig notes, “Well, perhaps because love creates something that was not there before.” Tommy asks, “What, like procreation?” Hedwig adds, “Sometimes just creation” (Mitchell 1998, p. 64). Here, Tommy specifically mentions the “procreative” aspects of gender complementarity present with Christian thought. Tommy seems to adhere to this logic and mentions the part that creates new life as that which makes complementary love sacred in the first place.

She then paints a sliver cross on his forehead. Tommy then sings, “Look what you done. You made me whole. Before I met you, I was the song. But now I’m the video.” Hedwig is then filled “with an ancient clarity” before realizing, “He’s the one.” In the staging of the show, the “Origin of Love” faces appear, both male and female, suggesting Hedwig’s journey to find her “other half” is over. She says,

No blood in my eyes, no blood on his face. He’s the one. The one who was taken. The one who left. The twin born by fission. He’ll die in fusion, our fusion, cold fusion, unlimited power, unlimited knowledge, the secrets he must hold, the memories that we shared but are now forgotten, the words to complete the sentence that I began. (Mitchell 1998, p. 66)

Again referencing the creation myths, Tommy then adds that Eve was separated from Adam and “Paradise was lost. So, when she enters him again, Paradise will be regained!” (Mitchell 1998, p. 66) As he touches the mass of flesh between her legs, Tommy and Hedwig kiss. He then leaves her, disgusted and knowing that he will not be able to find mythological completion.

Hedwig then sings “The Long Griff” as a lament for his departure. Helplessly, Hedwig turns to Yitzhak, saying how they’re both survivors, “The German and the Jew. Think of the symmetry. Think of the power. Think of the publicity. The gods would be terrified” (Mitchell 1998, p. 68). Yitzhak then spits in her face. In “Hedwig’s Lament,” she sings how she disseminated her heart to other people, “I gave a piece to my mother/ I gave a piece to my man/ I gave a piece to the rock star/ he took the stuff and ran.” The next song, “Exquisite Corpse,” describes violently how these experiences tore her up, “A collage/ all sewn up/ a montage/ all sewn up” (Mitchell 1998, p. 71). Hedwig then tears off her bra, revealing two tomatoes in place of her breasts. Smashing the tomatoes against her body, she destroys her fabricated stage persona and gender identity. The person playing Hedwig then comes back as the Tommy Gnosis character. In the reprise of the “Wicked Little Town,” the song begins with “Forgive me,/ for I did not know./ ‘Cause I was just a boy/ and you were so much more/ than any god

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<sup>11</sup> Readers familiar with early Christianity might be tempted to label this as a reference to Gnosticism, an early sect contemporaneous with the rise of Christianity that came to be regarded as heretical by the proto-orthodox church. This constellation of religious beliefs was notable for its emphasis on divine knowledge and repudiation of the good of material realities (Brakke 2010). Some, such as Henry, suggested that Tommy’s stage name references the “self-knowledge” Hedwig emphasizes (Henry 2016, pp. 71–72). A thorough account of Gnosticism exceeds the scope of this article. There is no substantive evidence beyond the use of the same Greek word to suggest that Mitchell is referencing this particular set of beliefs through Tommy’s character. Since his stage name emerges immediately after a discussion of the Fall due to Eve’s desire to “know shit,” this suggests a reference to the Tree of Knowledge rather than a lesser known religious and philosophical cult contemporaneous with the formation of Christianity.

could ever plan,/ more than a woman or a man." The lyric continues "That, when everything starts breaking down,/ you take the pieces off the ground/ and show this wicked town/ something beautiful and new." Showing the true growth past the logic of "wholeness," the character sings, "You think that Luck/ has left you there./ but maybe there's nothing/ up in the sky but air./ And there's no mystical design,/ no cosmic lover preassigned./ There's nothing you can find that cannot be found." Singing one last time of Hedwig's status as an outlier, "'Cause, with all the changes/ you've been through,/ it seems the stranger's always you,/ alone in some new wicked little town" (Mitchell 1998, pp. 73–74).

For the final song, "Midnight Radio," Hedwig returns to the stage when the two faces from the "Origin of Love" return projected on stage. In the song, Hedwig expresses fondness for the misfits of the world. She sings, "Know in your soul/ like your blood knows the way/ from your heart to your brain/ know that you're whole" (Mitchell 1998, p. 75). She belts, "Lift up your hands," as if in an act of praise to God. On the stage, the projected male and female faces merge into one, suggesting Hedwig found an alternative and queer way beyond this myth of "completion" (Mitchell 1998, p. 79).

## 6. Conclusions

What can one gather from this ambiguous ending? Hedwig does not find her "other half." There is no romantic ending—just satisfaction in the character's own "incompleteness." For those who never seem to be "whole," for those who do not seem to fit into conventional norms of gender, to be the person a transwoman or some other gender configuration, there is hope. This work operates as a "religious classic" in Tracy's terms because it offers an understanding of theological anthropology that resists normative versions of what it means to be human. Rather than concern about fulfilling any norm whatsoever, Hedwig walks off into the future not knowing who or "what" she definitely is and remains content with that. The musical, thus, proposes a theological anthropology that celebrates being a "misfit," embracing one's status as a societal "Other" as a source of creative potential over and against social marginalization. The "failure" of Hedwig in her quest for "completion" suggests the foolishness of such a quest itself. Rather than posit "procreation" that takes place through finding one's "other half," her character arch suggests a new "creation" that can be brought about by simply existing as her authentic self. Notably, this version of "authenticity" resists the more normative form outlined by Taylor (1991). Rather, this version of authenticity is about survival in a world that intends to reject someone who cannot fit into normative categories. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is not about a journey of a trans\* person becoming more accepting by others. The show is explicitly about the title character's search for love despite having a queer form of embodiment. Indeed, the title evokes Hedwig's relationship with what makes her so unique: her particular body—her "angry inch" of flesh that does not fit into any preconceived notion of what it means to be human. The musical also invites the reader to accept and grapple with the parts of one's body one cannot change. In witnessing her tales of rejection and heartbreak, viewers are invited to empathy as they struggle to understand the marginalization Hedwig experiences. The musical invites the audience to examine what being "complete" really means whilst interrogating the norms that demarcate bodily life. The failure of Hedwig to fit into any norm suggests we turn toward unexplored ways of inhabiting the world as we look toward what is "beautiful and new" in how we might understand ourselves.

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